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## **WOMEN OF DISCORD: FEMALE POWER IN AZTEC THOUGHT\***

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Women in the Aztec (or, more properly, Mexica)<sup>i</sup> world are an elusive force, occupying a position which may at times seem paraxodical. Narratives about the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, which flourished on the site of modern-day Mexico City from c.1325 until the Spanish conquest of 1521, originate overwhelmingly from male points of view and tend to be dominated by the archetypally masculine figures of warriors and priests.<sup>ii</sup> And yet, in the varied alphabetic, archaeological and pictorial sources, women appear as formidable goddesses, influential queens, workers, mothers, tradespeople, doctors and officials. But despite the power, prominence and esteem which these numerous roles suggest, women are persistently associated with disorder in the records. Female figures are influential, and respected, but they are also frequently disruptive or threatening: leaders of rebellion, inciters of disunity, what scholars have sometimes dubbed ‘Women of Discord’, evoking a provocative sacrifice from the Aztec past. Such troublesome yet important women are a recurring theme, epitomizing the complex associations of femininity in Aztec thought.

This article traces the metaphorical and historical associations between women and disorder in Aztec culture, as well as exploring the ways in which beliefs about the female capacity for disruption reflected and shaped reality. After establishing the historical and historiographical context, and tracing the origins of ‘Women of Discord’, I will discuss their structural significance in Aztec thought, before examining the ways in which beliefs about disorderly women translated into reality, influencing ideals for male and male behaviour, and prompting gender-specific fears about their problematic potential. Scholars have previously emphasized the contentious influence of divine and mytho-historical female figures, but I

argue that such issues can also be detected in the lives of ‘real’ women, affecting their behaviour and originating in their experiences. Although it can be difficult, from a modern perspective, to reconcile the fear of female power with women’s everyday agency, it is impossible to extricate the terrestrial and spiritual in Aztec thought; these realms were profoundly entangled in the Pre-Columbian world. During childbirth, it was believed that a woman’s body was physically saturated with the being of the earth goddess, Cihuacoatl (Woman Snake), and women’s ability to access such awesome power for both creation and destruction made them a formidable and ominous presence.<sup>iii</sup> Access to the chaotic energy of the earth transformed every female into a potential ‘Woman of Discord’, permitting them to be both a disruptive and a stabilizing force.

Female power is a familiar theme: scholars have spent the past half century illuminating women’s agency, influence and authority.<sup>iv</sup> Inevitably, women’s fertility and role in reproduction often lie at the heart of both historic and modern discourses, and belief in the troublesome potential of women’s procreative capacity is not unique to Aztec culture.<sup>v</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, writing of Victorian Britain, could have been referring to any most any point in the last thousand years of European history when she asked: ‘Why, at this specific historical period, should women have been perceived as being in possession of a disruptive sexuality that needed to be disciplined and controlled?’<sup>vi</sup> Throughout most of western history, such ideas have led to the suppression of female sexuality, the control of reproduction, and the criminalization of ‘unacceptable’ forms of desire, but in Tenochtitlan we see instead a society in which femininity and female sexuality were celebrated, at least in moderation.<sup>vii</sup> While Christian Europe punished women’s sinful nature through the pain of childbirth, indigenous Mexicans valued female fertility as a direct link to nature and the earth, forces which were powerful, although sometimes terrifying. The polytheistic Aztec world allowed for more complex understandings of intention and morality than the God/Devil binary which

was central to Judaeo-Christian belief. Rather than viewing negative behaviours in terms of ‘sin’, the Nahua thought in terms of *tlazolli* (‘filth’ or ‘trash’): the concept that something is bad when it is out of place or there is too much of it. Aztec wisdom privileged balance and moderation – a degree of *tlazolli* was necessary (for procreation for example) but too much could be dangerous.<sup>viii</sup> So, rather than seeing women’s fertility as purely a resource to be controlled and civilized – a primal force to be suppressed – the Aztecs recognized the strength of women’s connection to nature, while also treating it with caution.

In Tenochtitlan, ideas about women’s ‘disruptive’ nature do not seem to have translated into their practical subordination or devaluation and, in a society without primogeniture, where divorce was permissible and could be initiated by either party, there is little evidence for the patriarchal ‘policing’ of female bodies which happened in Europe. Far from being oppressed, many women in Aztec culture were respected and influential. Partially freed from the ubiquitous and unequal constraints of childcare by a system in which fathers’ held primary responsibility for raising their sons after weaning, women held tangible authority within their communities as individuals of economic and administrative importance, and were valued as both workers and mothers, possessing the same inheritance rights and recourse to the law as men.<sup>ix</sup> In this society of collective ownership and activity, women’s participation was recognized, and they played prominent roles within their communities, most notably as marketplace overseers (who provisioned the army), priestesses, craftswomen, healers, midwives, and matchmakers.<sup>x</sup> Women certainly appear in the histories playing traditional (albeit not necessarily voluntary) roles of importance, as royal wives and mothers, but in mytho-historical terms they often exceeded their male counterparts in importance. It is in this context that we should attempt to trace indigenous understandings of female power and the critical importance of the Women of Discord.<sup>xi</sup> The Aztec case offers a distinctive perspective on the ways in which women’s power can be constructed and this article seeks, in

part, to disrupt the bundle of western historical assumptions which often accompany discussions of female power.<sup>xii</sup>

## I

Vital to the origins of female power in Aztec culture was the way in which narratives were layered, cycles of history, myth and meaning giving individuals multiple significance. The Aztecs understood the world in cyclical terms in which past, present and future were integrally linked by recurring themes and episodes, and ‘history’ was continuously reinterpreted and revised in order to preserve order and explain events. In 1431, the tlatoani (ruler, literally ‘speaker’) of Tenochtitlan, Itzcoatl, took this to the extreme when he purged the archives, replacing them with an official history which legitimated the state and emphasized links to mythical and traditional sources of power.<sup>xiii</sup> This explicit invention of tradition can be frustrating for historians,<sup>xiv</sup> but the ways in which this ‘mythical history’ was constructed allows us to draw conclusions about the ideals and objectives of the Tenochca authorities.<sup>xv</sup> It is important to remember, however, that this history has now been filtered not only through the indigenous priorities of the fifteenth century, but also the colonial context of the sixteenth century when these narratives were recorded. Most of the sophisticated pictographic writings were destroyed by early missionaries in an excess of zeal and so we are dependent largely on post-conquest documents, all of which are affected to a greater or lesser degree by their production under Spanish influence, when attitudes were suffused with patriarchal, Judaeo-Christian perspectives. Tenochtitlan was a political focal point both before and after the conquest, so many of our sources relate to people of this city, and their ancestors, whose culture increasingly dominated their tribute empire during the fifteenth century. Thus, in this article, based principally on the colonial alphabetic texts, Tenochca narratives are often to the fore, but, while acknowledging the existence of regional differences, the broader, shared, ‘Aztec’ attitudes of the Nahuatl-speakers (Nahua) of Central

Mexico are also relevant. The use of pictographic writings can help to balance the colonial focus on the imperial capital, and I have taken care to highlight city-specific identities where they are relevant. Experienced in producing documents, and possessing an exceptional oral tradition, the Aztecs proved extraordinary collaborators in the production of alphabetic histories, many of which originated from what has been called the ‘golden age’ of Nahuatl literacy, c.1580-1610.<sup>xvi</sup>

Created at a time when Aztec survivors sought to justify and explain their heritage to a foreign force, as well as to their own descendants, the surviving records tend to present a normative ideal of society, in which collective identities dominate and individuals are rarely identified. ‘Official’ narratives pervade these documents, and society is idealized, with dissenting voices and actions minimized. Many of the early codices were created by Spanish missionaries and their indigenous collaborators who, despite their conscientious methods, inevitably allowed their ideals and preconceptions to bleed into their work. These sources are, therefore, the products of a blended perspective which must be carefully and sensitively handled.<sup>xvii</sup> At times, the intervention of Spanish perspectives is obvious: the sixteenth-century Franciscan friar, the ‘father of anthropology in the New World’, Bernardino de Sahagún wrote that the goddesses Tonantzin and Cihuacoatl, the ‘mujer de la culebra’ (woman of the snake), were indigenous versions of ‘our mother Eve’.<sup>xviii</sup> More difficult to detect are the subtle shifts which result from misunderstanding or disconnection between indigenous and Spanish worldviews. Christian morality with its binary sense of good and evil found it difficult to reconcile the manifold aspects of indigenous deities, leading to the simplification or fragmentation of their complex identities. Thus the multiple incarnations of the earth mother – Toci, Teteo innan, Cihuacoatl, Tlazolteol – were imperfectly divided into separate goddesses, in an attempt to resolve what missionaries saw as incompatible traits. Many negative aspects of femininity eventually coalesced in colonial records into the ‘savage

beast’ of Cihuacoatl, obscuring her original ambivalent nature, which was both nurturing and violent.<sup>xix</sup>

For the historian of gender, the picture is further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of writers and informants were men. This inevitably makes it easier to trace ideas about women than ideas by women, and there is a risk that the unruly nature of female power was exaggerated in the colonial sources by Spanish patriarchal preconceptions about women’s innately disruptive potential, a common trope in early modern European literature.<sup>xx</sup> Depictions of ‘dangerous’ women hint enticingly at parallels with Judaeo-Christian understandings of the corrupting nature of female sexuality and the sin of Eve, ‘the primordial, biblical woman of discord’.<sup>xxi</sup> Such superficial similarities tempt us to universalize western attitudes to women, or to assume that the Women of Discord are a product of Spanish mediation. But although the similarities to Christian narratives are certainly striking at times, the underlying model of gender relationships which emerges from the sources is distinctively different. Both the overlap and the disjuncture between Aztec and European attitudes to disruptive femininity are evident in the way that the goddess Cihuacoatl was transformed into the Wild Women and witches of European lore after the conquest.<sup>xxii</sup> Where Christian authors saw an evil ‘other’, the Aztecs saw a formidable mother goddess. Rather than regarding women as debased or ‘primitive’ because of their association with threatening forces and figures, the Aztecs saw them as influential, independent and effective. The Women of Discord exemplify the ways in which female power can be seen as disruptive without necessarily debasing women or depriving them of individual agency.

## II

The concept of the ‘Woman of Discord’ has been used fairly broadly by scholars but, strictly speaking, the phrase ‘la mujer de la Discordia’ refers to only one woman – Avenci, a foundational figure in the Aztec migration histories – and appears in just two sources, both

believed to originate from the tradition of the early, lost, *Crónica X* and composed in the latter part of the sixteenth century with the aid of indigenous collaborators.<sup>xxiii</sup> The first, and most detailed, reference to the Woman of Discord appears in the work of the Dominican friar Diego Durán. His *Historia*, recounts how, during their migration, the Aztecs were contentedly settled at Tizaapan when they were visited by their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, the god of war.

Seeing the few benefits he received from this tranquillity, he said to his priests and the elders: ‘It is necessary that we search for a woman who shall be called ‘The Woman of Discord’. She will be known as “Our Grandmother” [Toci] or “Our Mother” [Tonantzin] in the place where she shall dwell. This is not the land where we are to make our permanent home, this is not yet the site I have promised you, it is still to be found.’

Urging the Aztecs to take up arms and find an appropriately warlike way to resume their migration, Huitzilopochtli ordered them to ask Achitometl, tlatoani of nearby Culhuacan, to give them his daughter to become the ‘bride of their god’: ‘the Woman of Discord’ he had ordained.<sup>xxiv</sup> Convinced to hand over his daughter, Avenci,<sup>xxv</sup> by promises she would be ‘mistress of the Aztecs’, Achitometl came in state to Tenochtitlan, and was distraught to discover that his daughter had been sacrificed and flayed as an *ixiptlatl* (impersonator) of Toci, the awe-inspiring earth goddess. Avenci had indeed become a Woman of Discord; her horrified father led his city to war against the Aztecs, driving them away from Tizaapan towards the eventual site of their capital city, Tenochtitlan.<sup>xxvi</sup>

This critical episode also appears in other accounts of the Tenochca foundation, but these later Nahuatl (indigenous-language) sources from the turn of the seventeenth century do



not use the term ‘Woman of Discord’. Instead, Avenci is identified as Yaocihuatl (literally ‘war woman’ or ‘enemy woman’), another identity of the earth mother, who is often embodied as Toci (a figure largely inextricable from Teteoinnan, ‘Mother of the Gods’), or Cihuacoatl (Woman Snake).<sup>xxvii</sup> Thus, although Avenci is the only figure who bears the name ‘Woman of Discord’ in the sources, a complex bundle of associations ties the earth goddess, particularly in her aspect of Yaocihuatl, to the ‘Woman of Discord’.

Despite these problematic origins, the phrase ‘Woman of Discord’ is used quite regularly by scholars (who sometimes gloss it directly for Yaocihuatl),<sup>xxviii</sup> but so far as I am aware only Susan Gillespie has deployed the concept to any significant analytical purpose: she used the term ‘Women of Discord’ collectively to describe a group of royal females who played an important structural role in Aztec genealogy. Wayne Elzey has an insightful section on the concept in his study of prophetic histories, but his understanding essentially follows Gillespie’s, albeit with less focus on transition between cycles.<sup>xxix</sup> Gillespie, in deconstructing Tenochca dynastic histories, identified three ‘founding queens’, Illancueitl, Atotoztli, and Tecuichpo, who were married to the first, middle and last of the nine rulers of Tenochtitlan. Standing at the intersection of narrative, temporal and mythical cycles, these women appeared at critical junctures to provide the dynamism to move history and the Tenochca dynasty forward.<sup>xxx</sup> For Gillespie, such women:

performed a crucial function in the royal genealogy... With the commencement of each cycle, a woman endowed the succeeding kings with the right to rule, a woman who thereby merged with her counterparts before and after her, to whom she was structurally identical. She was one woman and many women at once, a means of achieving union but representative of opposition, a source of power yet also of chaos,

a threat to the orderly progression of the world but absolutely necessary to its maintenance; in short, a woman of discord.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Gillespie's analysis focuses on specific noble women, but the same richly layered prism of meaning which gave royal figures such as Avenci and the founding queens structural importance also imbued every Aztec woman with the primal potential to become a 'Woman of Discord', potentially transformative but also terrifying.

### III

As I have already hinted, individual women's cosmological and dynastic authority was established and reinforced by patterning them onto various female deities and mytho-historical figures, and such layering of narrative and meaning is vital explaining the significance of female power. Woven throughout the migration histories which were so central to Aztec tradition is a strong thread concerning key female characters who we might identify as Women of Discord. Making decisive interventions at moments of conflict, much like Gillespie's 'founding queens', these women played critical, though frequently disruptive, roles at pivotal moments. Where male figures tend to appear as a stabilising force in foundation narratives, women's entrenched potential to engender disorder is seen as key to their significance; feminine influence is frequently seen as a threat to the secure establishment of the Aztec state. Two figures in particular stand out: Coyolxauhqui and Malinalxoch, the sisters of Huitzilopochtli.

According to the histories, Coatlicue (Snake Skirt, a principal aspect of the earth goddess) was miraculously pregnant with Huitzilopochtli when her daughter, Coyolxauhqui, filled with rage at the dishonourable extramarital pregnancy, attacked her mother with the support of her brothers: the Centzonuitznaua, 'the Four Hundred' gods of the southern stars. Leaping fully matured from Coatlicue's womb, Huitzilopochtli routed his siblings,

dismembering his sister and casting her from the mountain of Coatepec [Fig.1]. Thus the Aztecs' patron god triumphed over the first threat to his pre-eminence in highly symbolic fashion.<sup>xxxii</sup> As the mythical founder of Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli was synonymous with the success of the state, and its very existence, and his first action, having been born of a disruptive mother, was to decapitate a turbulent woman. A more explicitly nationalistic version of the story appears in the work of Diego Durán, who sought to reconstruct a linear dynastic 'history' with the aim of demonstrating that the Aztecs were a 'true' civilisation. In his account, the Aztecs had paused their migration at Tula, when a group of troublemakers led by Coyolxauhqui appealed to Huitzilopochtli, urging that he should 'bring an end to the pilgrimage in search of even more peace than we enjoy here'. Infuriated by this disobedience, the god swore vengeance against those who dared oppose his divine plan and the next morning Coyolxauhqui (the only rebel identified by name) and the other troublemakers were found dead in the ball court [Fig. 1]. 'All the breasts had been torn open and the hearts removed.'<sup>xxxiii</sup> Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui were both given agency by their capacity to 'disrupt' the Aztec timeline, precipitating the birth of the warrior state (or at least its divine alter ego).

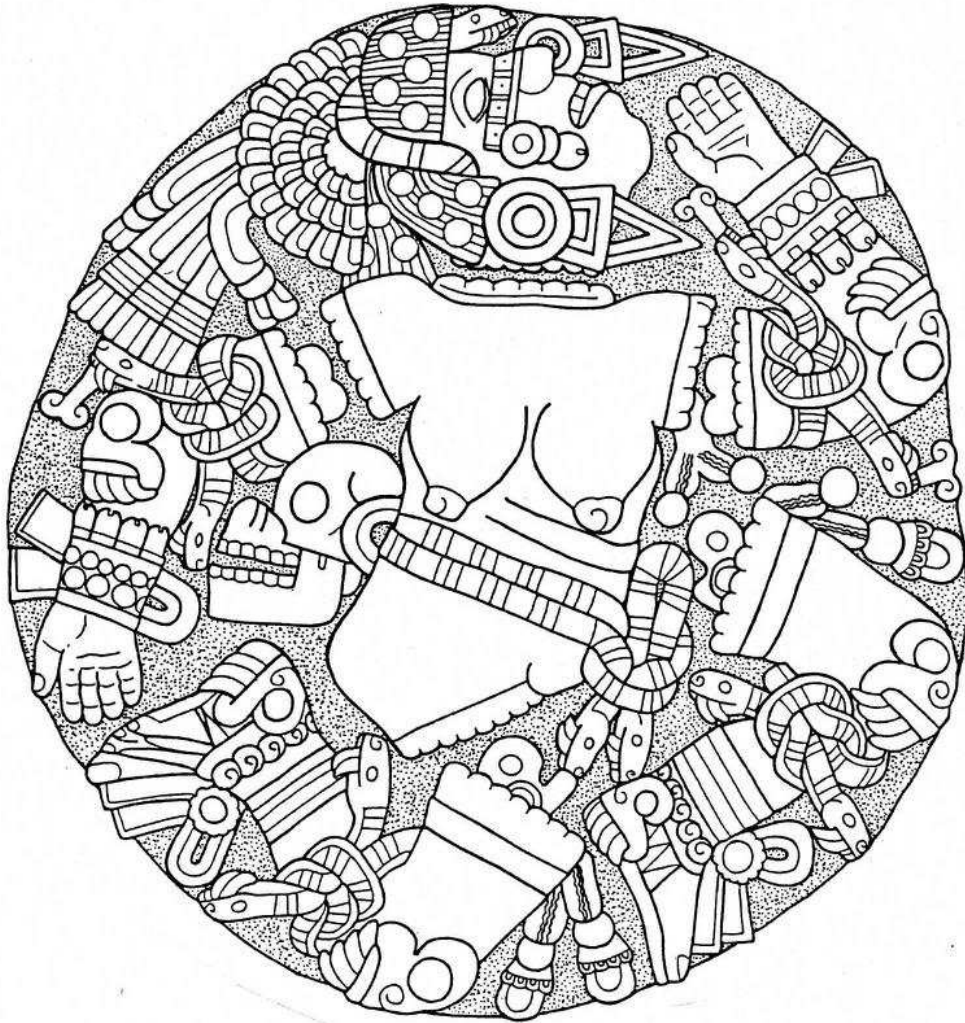


Fig. 1. Drawing by Emily Umberger of the 3.25m diameter Coyolxauhqui Stone, showing the dismembered goddess, now in the Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico. Reproduced with permission of Emily Umberger.

Malinalxoch, Huitzilopochtli's elder sister, intriguingly mirrors Coyolxauhqui: both provoked confrontations which moved the Mexica migration forward.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Malinalxoch's troubled relationship with her brother is vividly evoked by the mestizo author Chimalpahin (1579–1660), one of those who connected Avenci with Yaocihuatl.<sup>xxxv</sup> Malinalxoch supposedly wielded mysterious and dangerous powers: 'she was evil, was responsible for great wickedness, was one who sucked people's blood, made them lose their footing, deceived them, made them lose their way, put them to sleep, made them eat snakes, made them eat owls... And she became a sorceress; she was exceedingly perverse.'<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Malinalxoch exercised a dreadful, but plainly formidable, influence. Despite her sinister reputation, she commanded the loyalty of a significant minority during the migration, but the histories expose a clear sense of unease that such influence was wielded by a female hand and her ‘cunning and evil dealings...caused much harm among the people’. Depending on the source, Huitzilopochtli either resolved to abandon his sister due to her malevolent influence, or was urged to do so by the Mexica, who had put up with Malinalxoch ‘because she was the sister of Huitzilopochtli, but finally they asked the god to get rid of her’. Malinalxoch and her followers were deserted while they slept. Later, Malinalxoch’s son Copil swore vengeance and pledged to destroy those who abandoned his mother. Eventually, besieged after a punishing campaign, the heavily outnumbered Aztecs ‘hacked their way through the enemy ranks’ and escaped, guided by Huitzilopochtli, to their settlement at Tizaapan. Here, a Woman of Discord was not only a corrupting influence over her own son and followers, but also a threat to the very Aztec nation, which they aimed to ‘annihilate...not leaving one person alive’.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The capacity to incite dissent is frequently associated with women, in both the divine and human realms. Malinalxoch’s influence was destructive, but also critical to building the nation; her abandonment by Huitzilopochtli initiated a historically important division in the tribe, allowing the fledgling Aztec state to assert its authority and military prowess. The political triumph of one faction over another provided the opportunity to ‘raise the Aztec nation to the heavens’.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This details of this narrative differ in some incarnations, but in every case the antagonist is female.<sup>xxxix</sup> Fascinatingly, Copil is the only male figure named as a threat to the Aztecs in any migration narrative, and even he was acting under his mother’s influence and of inferior strength: although a ‘great nahualli [sorcerer]...Copil was not the equal of his mother.’<sup>xl</sup>

The opposition between the ‘male’ state and a ‘female’ opponent regularly appears in stories associated with the establishment of Aztec authority and is underscored by the frequent interpretation of the Coyolxauhqui myth as a battle between the Sun (Huitzilopochtli) and the Moon (Coyolxauhqui). In this ‘astronomical allegory’,<sup>xli</sup> Huitzilopochtli’s mother, Coatlicue, represents the earth. Just as Huitzilopochtli leapt gloriously from his mother’s womb, so the Sun emerges daily at dawn, scattering the Moon, and the Stars (the Four Hundred). Like Huitzilopochtli, its patron god, the Sun was closely associated with the state itself; the threat of eclipse or permanent darkness loomed large in the imagination, and the Aztecs lived in constant fear that the Sun might fail to arise victorious from its nightly battle under the disk of the earth. Warriors who had died in battle or as a sacrifice accompanied the Sun in its progress across the sky, which was fuelled by the streams of human blood offered daily in sacrificial ritual. By reading the Coyolxauhqui myth as a confrontation between the masculine Sun and the feminine Moon, the implication which emerges from other interpretations is strongly emphasized: the assertion of state supremacy was linked to the symbolic defeat of a female adversary.<sup>xlii</sup>

#### IV

It is neither coincidence nor misogyny that opponents of the state are personified as female,<sup>xliii</sup> but a compelling reflection of the perilous nature of feminine power in Aztec thought. But such ‘Women of Discord’ were not merely a metaphorical way to frame a threat, they also reflected political and social realities; there are parallels between the significance of mytho-historical women and the genealogical importance of royal women. Although it is hard to get a complete picture of elite women’s roles in the intricate inter-city networks of the Valley of Mexico, it is clear that they were capable of exercising considerable socio-political influence. Royal women were the building blocks of inter-dynastic diplomacy, capable of ennobling families, cementing alliances, or making a political statement. There are occasional

accounts of cihuatlatoque (woman rulers) and female regents, and power and nobility often passed through the female line.<sup>xliv</sup> It is pointless to rehearse here the historically ubiquitous use of noble women to make ‘marriage alliances’, but the specific nuances of the Mexican model of ‘interdynastic hypogamy’ – superordinate rulers giving their daughters as wives to the tlatoani of subordinate cities – allowed considerable scope for manipulating women (both in reality and in the historical record) to send political signals and engage in strategic diplomacy.<sup>xlv</sup>

According to an incident depicted in the *Codex Xolotl*, an early colonial cartographic history fleshed out some decades later by a Nahuatl historian of noble descent, the Tepanec War which saw the Aztecs’ rise to prominence was heralded by the rejection of a woman.<sup>xlvi</sup> In the early fifteenth century, the ruler of Azcapotzalco sent his daughter Tecpachitl to the subordinate city of Texcoco, to become the wife of its future tlatoani Ixtlilxochitl. Signalling his intention to switch political alliances, Ixtlilxochitl insulted Azcapotzalco by taking Tecpachitl as a concubine and instead marrying a senior royal from Tenochtitlan. In the recorded histories of this incident, manufactured to increase Texcocan prestige, these women stood as a bridge between political cycles; they are the pivotal figures Gillespie identifies as standing at the juncture of dynastic histories. But although Tecpachitl may have possessed symbolic power as a ‘Woman of Discord’, she was the real victim of the metaphorical slap in the face intended for her father Tezozomoc.<sup>xlvii</sup> Just because Aztec women were powerful and often respected, does not mean that they could not suffer personal indignities, injustice or oppression.

Similar manoeuvrings may have been at play in a marriage described by a later Ixtlilxochitl, who describes how one of his ancestors, the Texcocan tlatoani Nezahualcoyotl, fell in love at first sight with Huitxilxochitzin, the Tenochca fiancé or wife of the tlatoani of Tepechpan, a subject city of Texcoco in the 1440s. After having her husband killed,

Nezahualcoyotl took Huitzilxochitzin as his wife. Typically this story, which also appears in the pictorial *Tira de Tepechpan* annals, is presented as a romance, but it is possible that these events mask a punishment of Tepechpan for its ruler's failure to take a Texcocan bride. In this reading, the taking of a Tenochca queen indicated Tepechpan's ambition, connecting the city to the new imperial capital of Tenochtitlan, and Huitzilxochitzin's remarriage marked the reaffirmation of Texcocan authority over Tepechpan.<sup>xlvi</sup> The next Texcocan tlatoani was married to a far more obviously disruptive female: Chalchiuhnenetzin, daughter of the Tenochca ruler. This young woman allegedly took multiple lovers, before murdering them and using their skeletons to make statues. Whether this is true or not, Chalchiuhnenetzin was certainly executed by her husband, forcing a rift between Tenochtitlan and the Texcocans, at a time when the latter aimed to assert their independence.<sup>xlix</sup>

Exogamy was a vital diplomatic tool, but it carried an element of risk: a foreign wife might be a powerful ally, or a clandestine enemy. The symbolic role of the Women of Discord resonates with the reality of royal women married to foreign elites: caught between loyalty to their home city and family, and their new husband, who would these women favour? The female potential for trouble was no mere metaphor: a wife who betrayed either her father or her husband possessed serious disruptive power, which could become a dynamic force given the right circumstances. Such intrigues are exemplified by accounts of Tenochtitlan's victory in 1473 over its twinned city of Tlatelolco in a 'civil war'; the chronicles firmly establish Chalchiuhnenetzin, wife of the Tlatelolcan ruler Moquihuix and sister of the Tenochca tlatoani Axayacatl, as a 'Woman of Discord'. The subject of a very richly layered metaphorical history, which I have unpicked at greater length elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> Chalchiuhnenetzin incited 'discord' both actively and passively. She not only enflamed an already tense situation between the cities by warning her brother that Moquihuix was preparing for war, as revenge for the abuse she suffered at the hands of her scandalous and



unfaithful husband, but her vulva also ‘spoke out’, delivering a powerful prophecy of Tlatelolco’s fall which shaped her husband’s actions, leading to his ignominious defeat.<sup>li</sup> Noble wives occupied an ambiguous middle ground which gave them the scope to become one of two different types of Women of Discord in the narratives: the ‘domestic’ or ‘internal’ woman who split, or was severed, from the group and became a force for disruption from the outside; and the ‘foreign’ or ‘external’ woman who entered the group and whose treatment or behaviour caused discord.<sup>lii</sup> Typically Malinalxoch and Coyolxauhqui and the murderous Chalchiuhnenetzin were of the first type; Avenci, Tecpachitl and Huitzilxochitzin of the second. Moquihuix’s wife, Chalchiuhnenetzin, manages to play both roles, partly because storytellers often cast their characters differently.

## V

Women were thus both literally and symbolically important, but even when reading what appear to be simple genealogies we must remain constantly alert to the ways in which metaphorical structures have overlaid the form and detail of accounts. The fact that two women who stirred up enmity both bear the name Chalchiuhnenetzin, for example, must rouse our suspicions: might this be a symbolic designation? Or a later cyclical imposition? Partly due to such symbolic structuring, there is little point trying to draw the empirical ‘truth’ from these narratives, but it is possible that some of the Women of Discord originated in ‘real’ events. There are certainly parallels between mythical tradition and the events depicted in annals. It seems very likely, for example, that the tradition of conflict between Huitzilopochtli and a female antagonist reflects one or more historic contests between Aztec factions. The Codex Telleriano-Remensis, one of the finest surviving examples of an indigenous pictographic chronicle, shows Huitzilopochtli (or his priest) walking away from four warriors led by a woman labelled ‘Tonanicaca’ (a variant of Tonantzin).<sup>liii</sup>

The highlighting of the Women of Discord at particular moments also suggests that these traditions were used for specific strategic purposes. The installation of the ‘Coyolxauhqui Stone’ monument [Fig. 1] during the period of the 1473 civil war suggests an increased focus on this narrative of Huitzilopochtli’s triumph at a time when his followers were facing political threat; Coyolxauhqui was a reminder of Huitzilopochtli’s dominance and would have sent a very clear message to those who dared to challenge his ‘chosen’ city. Using archaeological evidence, Emily Umberger has even made the case that the monumental figure of Coyolxauhqui was intended to serve as a direct likeness of the defeated Moquihuix; the manner of his death, tumbling from the summit of Tlatelolco’s main pyramid, was certainly framed to mirror Coyolxauhqui’s dramatic fall [Fig. 2].<sup>liv</sup> Thus, myth and history were blended together, humans and gods blurring, and this cyclicity, reflected in the recurring appearance of the Women of Discord and their counterparts at critical moments of transition, was emphasized by the ritual reiteration of the death of the Woman of Discord in sacrificial ritual.

Weighing more than eight tons, the colossal Coyolxauhqui Stone exemplifies the prominence of the Woman of Discord, not only in official narratives, but also everyday practice. Lying at the base of the Templo Mayor (Great Temple), at the heart of the ritual centre of Tenochtitlan, the sculpture was a constant reminder of the fate of those who defied Huitzilopochtli and his people.<sup>lv</sup> This message must have been keenly felt by the sacrificial victims who trudged past this huge monument, the long walk to their death at the summit of the pyramid giving them time to reflect, before their own bodies were thrown down the steps to rest with the goddess: united in defeat. In this ritual reiteration of Coyolxauhqui’s death, there is a sense in which every sacrificial victim was transformed into the Woman of Discord, the ultimate enemy of the state. But it was during the harvest feast of Ochpaniztli (sweeping

of the roads) when the ritual cycle passed closest to history, and we see Avenci's original sacrifice repeated, as another young girl was decapitated and flayed as an *ixiptlatl* of Toci.



Fig. 2. The defeated Moquihuix falls from the temple at Tlatelolco, from Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley, 1992), f.10r. Reproduced with permission of Frances F. Berdan.

Women and warriors were both central to Ochpaniztli, emphasizing its twin concerns of fertility and threat: the dual associations of femininity. Displaying the social and sexual power drawn from their connection to Toci, midwives, women physicians and courtesans skirmished for four days before accompanying the supposedly ‘unaware’ victim to the temple. In a tangible sense, the *ixiptlatl* stood as a representative of all women, and was brought to the temple by those who most explicitly displayed female influence and sexuality. Following the girl’s decapitation, a priest dressed in her skin was met by nobles and warriors, striking their shields and fighting with straw brooms in mock battles which sometimes took on bloody seriousness. Both in its central ritual – the killing of impersonator of Toci – and in its links to fertility, femininity and state stability, Ochpaniztli powerfully evokes the death of the original Woman of Discord, *Avenci*.<sup>lvi</sup> One early source makes the parallel explicit, claiming that the victim at Ochpaniztli was called *Yaocihuatl*.<sup>lvii</sup>

Ochpaniztli’s unusual form of sacrifice deepens the links between the different incarnations of the Women of Discord, connecting *Coyolxauhqui* directly to *Avenci* via her identity as *Toci/Yaocihuatl*. *Toci*’s *ixiptlatl* was the victim of an extremely rare mode of sacrifice called *tepotzoa*: decapitation laid on the back of a priest. Although post-mortem decapitation was a common element of Aztec ritual, a tiny minority of victims, all female, were killed by beheading.<sup>lviii</sup> Only women were permitted to truly share *Coyolxauhqui*’s fate and be dismembered by/for *Huitzilopochtli*, and *tepotzoa* sacrifices occurred on only two occasions: Ochpaniztli, and the summer festival of *Uey tecuilhuitl* (great feast of the lords), another fertility festival dedicated to *Cihuacoatl*.<sup>lix</sup> The discovery of female skulls in the offering chamber below the *Coyolxauhqui* Stone strongly suggests that the dedication of the stone involved *tepotzoa* (and likely took place during either Ochpaniztli or *Uey tecuilhuitl*), further connecting the human avatars of the Woman of Discord to their mytho-historical alter ego.<sup>lx</sup> Thus, the practice of decapitation connects *Coyolxauhqui* – so famously the subject of

graphic dismemberment – with the women who shared her fate, women who embodied the great goddesses of the earth: the Women of Discord.

## VI

The constant ritual reminders of the Women of Discord – decapitated over and over again in sacrifice and at the Coyolxauhqui Stone – sent a forceful message about the profound but dangerous nature of female power. It may seem counterintuitive to regard ritual execution as empowering, but through this ceremony *ixiptla* were given privileged access to the sacred, their ‘essence...cosmo-magically transformed into gods’.<sup>lxi</sup> Being female certainly did not equate to ‘weakness’, but the threatening associations of metaphysical femininity fit awkwardly for the western observer with a society in which ‘real’ women held concrete markers of esteem and influence. Cihuacoatl featured at the highest level of government, her male representative ruling jointly with the *tlatoani*, and women held political, economic, legal and social rights; our sources are full of active, articulate, influential individuals whose energy and cooperation were essential for communal prosperity.<sup>lxii</sup> But respect was combined with apprehension, and so human women – avatars of Cihuacoatl during childbirth – were touched by their close connection to the disturbing powers of the earth. The corpse of a woman who died in childbirth was closely protected by her husband, lest young warriors attempt to steal her fingers or forearm: talismans infused with divine energy.<sup>lxiii</sup> Power originated in dangerous places and so although (or perhaps because) femininity was threatening, even terrifying, women remained objects of respect. The procreative power which allowed women to become great mothers of warriors also imbued them with troubling potential. And, importantly, female influence was particularly associated with subversion, duplicity and disruption: with the capacity to cause ‘discord’.

The male dominance of sources and the tendency to normalize social groups makes it particularly difficult to trace the experiences of ‘ordinary’ women in Aztec culture, but the

twelve-book Florentine Codex offers us a distinctive insight into social attitudes. This mammoth ethnographic corpus, compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún with the assistance of scores of indigenous informants and assistants, contains a voluminous directory of The People, defined by characteristics such as gender, age, occupation, disposition and family status. Here the ‘old woman’ rubs shoulders with the ‘noble man of middle age’ and professionals such as the merchant, physician, scribe and tomato seller meet the buffoon, highwayman and thief. And, most importantly for our purposes, gendered ideals are revealed in the enumeration of ‘virtues and vices which were of the body and of the soul’.<sup>lxiv</sup>

The ‘bad mother’ is one of the first women described in The People: ‘evil, dull, stupid, sleepy, lazy’, she is deceitful, unreliable and inconsiderate. More significantly, however, she is censured not only for her own poor conduct, but also for her capacity to lead others astray: ‘She causes disregard of conventions, she shows the way – leads the way – to disobedience; she expounds nonconformity.’ This emphasis on the bad mother’s propensity to incite others to disobedience is in striking contrast to the ‘bad father’. Although also ‘lazy, incompassionate, negligent, unreliable’ and unfeeling, the bad father was ‘a shirker, a loafer, a sullen worker’; here, the emphasis is strongly laid on the husband’s negligence and inattention to his duties. Far from prompting misbehaviour amongst others, a bad father seems unlikely to do anything at all.<sup>lxv</sup>

Reiterating the idea that troublesome women could be a corrupting influence, the description of the ‘bad grandmother’ also exposes deep-seated concerns about women’s ability to lead others into evil; the sole concern expressed about her behaviour is a tendency for disruption. ‘The bad grandmother [is] a stupid old woman, a leader of others into darkness, a bad example. She misleads, she deludes one; she places one in danger, she leads one into difficult places.’<sup>lxvi</sup> Just as Malinalxoch deceived people and ‘made them lose their way’, and Coyolxauhqui was an ‘instigator of rebellion’, so the bad mother and grandmother

reveal women's potential for deceit and disorderly influence.<sup>lxvii</sup> Fascinatingly, in this first chapter on relatives, there is no suggestion that men could become a model for disobedience. The father, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle and nephew were all obliged to set a good example, and the ideal father was 'exemplary; he leads a model life', but these men apparently lacked women's distinctive ability to corrupt. The disruptive potential of speech in women's mouths seems of particular concern. Criticisms of male speech focus almost exclusively on arrogance: 'bad' noblemen are mocking, vain, prideful, braggarts, but these are not entirely negative qualities in a society of ostentatious warrior manhood.<sup>lxviii</sup> By contrast, the twenty characters in the 'thirteenth chapter, which telleth of the noblewomen' are criticized throughout for their capacity to cause discord: The 'bad noblewoman...wishes to cause worry...incites riots...causes havoc...leads one into danger; she leads, she introduces one into error'.<sup>lxix</sup> But although these depictions are unflattering, they are hardly disempowering; all of these women possess considerable force.

## VII

Amongst the great rote-learned orations of the huehuetlahtolli, the 'ancient word' or 'speeches of the elders', the advice of a mother to her daughter,<sup>lxx</sup> emphasizing matters of communication and propriety in personal interaction, intriguingly hints at parental concerns about young women's potential for conflict.<sup>lxxi</sup> Aztec norms emphasised politeness and etiquette but, in a society of soldiers, while strength and anger were potentially disruptive, they were also positive qualities provided they were warranted, and expressed in an appropriate way.

As thou art to go, thou art not to look here and there, not to look from side to side, not constantly to look upward, nor art thou to be a hypocrite. Nor art thou to put hatred in thine eyes; thou art not to put hatred in thy face. Look joyously at everyone. And also,

that no one will have occasion to despise thee, put anger in the spirit at the proper time. And behold, never concern thyself with words; let what is said be said. Do not speak with others; pretend that thou dost not hear it. With thee will the words end.<sup>lxxii</sup>

This dense passage of advice provides a complex picture of the way in which young women were expected to interact with others. Beyond the rather cursory encouragements to always look upon everyone with joy and to set hatred aside, the mother's words also carry more subtle implications. Young women seem to have been urged to remain aloof and impartial when they were goaded or tempted to anger. A perceived tendency for girls to gossip and quarrel was apparently a significant concern, and one to be cautioned against. But although the mother urges her daughter to avoid enmity, appear pleasant, and pass through the world in a dignified fashion, amiability was only suited to certain circumstances; passivity and indifference were not always appropriate. Women with 'anger in the spirit', Women of Discord, were welcome, but only at the proper time.

It is significant that the young woman was not urged to silence, but to reticence in the face of negative speech. She was not counselled to guard against all words, only damaging ones. This advice to practice reserve and discretion is consistent with Aztec concerns to preserve communal peace and cooperation, but it also reflects concerns about women's disruptive potential, anxieties which are cast into sharp relief by the parallel advice of a father to his son. Men's relationship to language was different from women's. Although boys were admonished to equal vigilance in their interactions, the father's words reveal detectable differences between male and female communication:

Guard, take care of thy ears, of that which thou hearest. Do not gossip; let what is said remain as said. Ignore it. Pretend not to understand the words. If thou canst not ignore



it, respond not. And speak not; only listen; let what is said remain as said. And when something is said, if something evil is told there, that which meriteth imprisonment, that which meriteth death, and on thee – if thou dost withdraw with others, if thou attest foolishly with others, especially if thou lendest a word, if thou speakest among others – on thee it will be laid; [then] thou wilt expiate the words of others, thou wilt atone for others, and thou wilt be taken, thou wilt be seized. And furthermore, thou wilt be imprisoned. It is said, because of thee words will be denied, there will be defending, there will be excusing. And he whose words they are, perhaps he is there, perhaps he remaineth thereby virtuous, and perhaps he is content. But thereabouts thou art made a fool.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

This advice, given by a father to his son, appears at first glance to be very similar to the mother/daughter discussion, but a clear distinction emerges if we look more closely at the consequences of incautious speech for men and women. While the woman was urged to reticence for apparently altruistic reasons, for the good of society, the possible effects of injudicious speech for a man had considerably more personal implications. The father exhorted his son to take care in his words, not because of the potential disruption he could cause, but because of the damage he might bring upon himself. In the competitive world of warriors, an Aztec youth must remain constantly vigilant to the possibility that he might be ‘made a fool’. There is no suggestion that this hypothetical group of gossips might become shared partners in conspiracy; the repeated assumption is that individual concerns will prevail and, just as warriors were expected to act independently, even selfishly, on the battlefield, so they should protect themselves and their personal interests in any social conflict.<sup>lxxiv</sup> This emphasis on the individual concerns of men by comparison with women’s selflessness is reflected in the speeches made to young men and women when they reached the age of

maturity. Young men were promised the public rewards of military success, while women were expected to promote the welfare of family and community for entirely unselfish reasons, and left in no doubt that their world was ‘not a place of joy, it is not a place of contentment...it is a place of joy with fatigue, of joy with pain on earth’.<sup>lxxv</sup> Responsible for the ultimate altruistic act of giving life to others, women were critical to maintaining the social networks which bound the community together and so were expected selflessly to keep the peace. For men, focused on asserting their supremacy in battle, personal and selfish desires possessed less potential for dangerous disruption. In Aztec culture, where cause of death (not behaviour in life) determined your afterlife,<sup>lxxvi</sup> actions were judged by their consequences for the community, rather than by individual morality. While women were censured for nonconformity, it was impotence and sheer ineffectiveness which were most offensive to Aztec expectations of masculine vigour.

Thus, despite urgings to cautious speech, men appear to have been excused significantly more than women in matters of public expression. People born under the nineteenth day sign, One Eagle,<sup>lxxvii</sup> were destined to a life of vociferous volubility, but the way in which this was manifested, and its acceptability, depended on gender. On this ‘evil day sign... he who was born then was boastful, and brave, daring, fearing nothing and no one. And it was said that the women also were daring, of ill fame, of evil tongue, shameless, and immodest.’<sup>lxxviii</sup> The following description explains that men born under this sign were dishonest and presumptuous, but although they were ‘vainglorious’ and ‘boastful’, warrior culture allowed them to benefit from this lack of modesty. Despite being condemned as scornful and even ‘perverted’, these men could advance through their prideful recklessness in battle. Because, if ‘a man, he became a chieftain, a man-at-arms, debauched, evil and daring....And sometimes, if he became neglectful, he was captured and imprisoned, or died in battle.’<sup>lxxix</sup> Although the Florentine Codex makes clear that these men were wicked and

depraved, they were nonetheless capable of prospering and achieving social success, attaining military rank, and even achieving the ideal, enviable, warrior death in battle.<sup>lxxx</sup>

For women born on One Eagle, no such positive prospects existed to mitigate their fate, and they were afflicted with unpleasant, almost animalistic, qualities.

She was truly of evil tongue, vile-mouthed, inhuman in speech – big-mouthed, of biting words. Her great joy, her great pleasure, was evil speaking. She was one who vituperated others, who insulted and affronted them. Like a dog, [she let] no one head her off or trap her. If someone approached her, at once she quickly sprang on and clung to her. She gripped her, and scratched, clawed, tore, and hacked her face... she pricked, beat, smashed, and struck it.<sup>lxxxi</sup>

This brutal description continues relentlessly, the ‘big mouthed’ woman pulling out her victim’s hair, breaking their nose, and ripping her clothes to shreds, leaving her in tatters. Debased and bestial, this frightening female stood outside of human convention, apparently acting instinctively and brutishly. Such warnings were almost certainly rooted in fears of the destructive potential of women. While merely a negative quality for men, loose and biting speech in women could be a devastating force. The connection between femininity and speech is also explicit in stories of the fall of Tlatelolco, when Chalchiuhnenetzin’s vulva became the mouthpiece of prophecy.

A highly expressive people with a vibrant oral culture, the Aztecs recognised the power of words to wound, and women’s words carried particular power, for good or for ill. In the spring of each year, the Aztecs celebrated the festival of Uey Tozoztli, the ‘Great Vigil’ honouring the maize gods. With red feathers adorning their arms and legs and faces glimmering with iron pyrites, adolescent girls carried decorated bundles of cobs on their

backs to the temple of Chicomecoatl through a reverently hushed city, for ‘no one might look at them...no one joked with them’. At times, however, the respectful quiet was shattered by the inevitable teasing of young warriors, and it was the girls’ responsibility to reprimand these irritating upstarts. Turning on a rebellious youth, the young women rebuked him, doubting his military prowess, and rejecting his manhood, saying: ‘Art thou not just a woman like me?’ And although the victim of this scolding might curse his tormentors, wishing them ill and hoping they would end up as old maids, his ‘weak’ words were useless in the face of the female attack.

For verily thus the women could torment [young men] into war; thus they moved them; thus the women could prod them into battle.

Indeed we men said:

‘Bloody, painful are the words of the women; bloody, penetrating are the women's words. Indeed we have gone; we have said that we shall not live. Perhaps we shall merit something, O our friend.’<sup>lxxxii</sup>

Teasing between peers is hardly unusual, but it is the force of the girls’ speech which is remarkable. Confidently articulate, the young women defended their sacred duty and censured the audacious youths for their insolence. Although preferring to honour the god with silence, the girls showed no reticence in exchanging insults with those disrespectful few who deserved them. The painful, penetrating words of the women goaded the youthful warriors into battle by threatening their masculinity, driving them towards the honourable death which they hoped one day to ‘merit’. Although women were often urged to modesty and reserve in Aztec society, they were also expected to be articulate and forceful when the occasion demanded it.

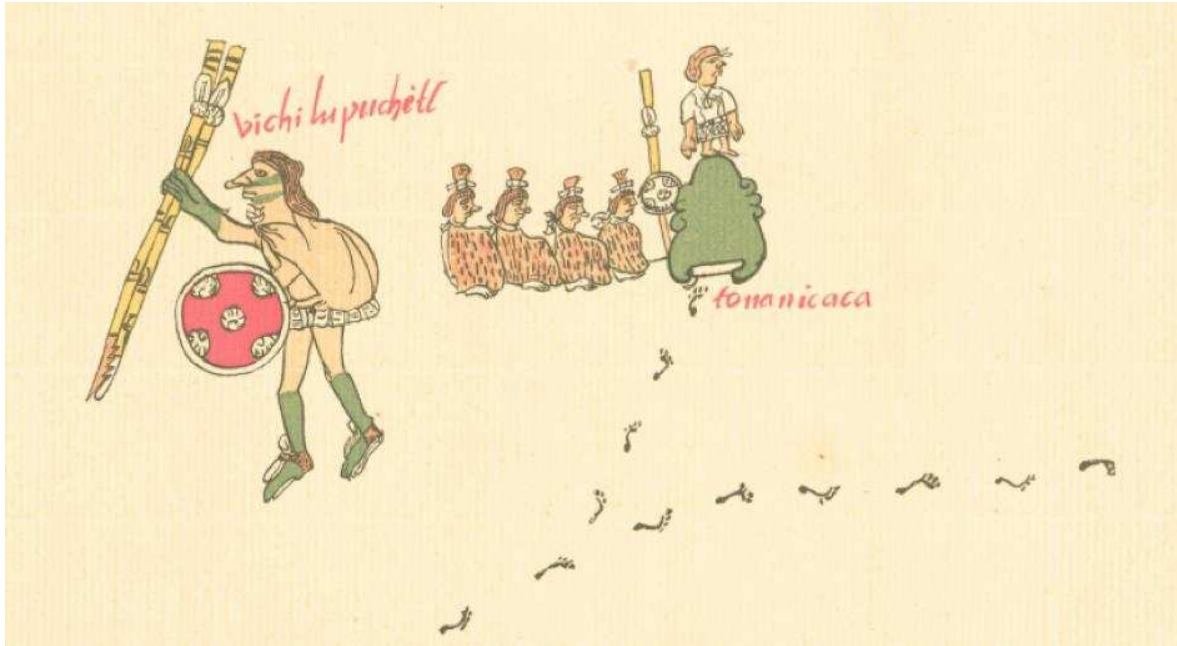


Fig. 3. Malintzin with Cortés and Xicotencatl of Tlaxcala, from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala fragment in the Nettie Lee Benson Collection, University of Texas Library. Photograph by Stephanie Wood (30 May 2014), and reproduced with her permission.

The power of women's words can be traced in the figure of Malintzin (also known as Doña Marina, or La Malinche), the Nahuatl woman who served as Cortés's translator during the conquest of the Aztecs. In some ways, she might be seen as the ultimate 'woman of discord', accused of betraying her people, but standing aside a historical rift, ushering in a new cycle, like Gillespie's founding queens. Although often elided in Spanish accounts, Malintzin is central to indigenous images of the conquest, which show her at the heart of events, a woman engaging prominently in political negotiation [Fig. 3]. In her ambiguous position as an indigenous 'collaborator' Malintzin epitomizes the complexity of women's power: disruptive, but also productive.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Sometimes seen as the ultimate traitor to her people (malinchista is an insult reserved for people who prefer foreign things), Malintzin managed to be seen as 'one of us people here',<sup>lxxxiv</sup> while at the same time representing a dangerous, alien, force. Today, in the traditional Mexican *danzas*, the figure of 'Malinche' still plays a dual role, as both Toci, the earth mother, and Cortés's mistress, a 'boundary figure' (blurred with Moctezuma's daughter, Isabel) who passes legitimacy from the Aztecs

to the Spanish.<sup>lxxxv</sup> Her influence was essential, but also destructive. It goes too far to say that indigenous people would have regarded Malintzin, in their retrospective refashioning of events, as a direct counterpart to mytho-historical figures, but the images of her certainly take on a new resonance when they are read in the light of Aztec understandings of the Women of Discord.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Thus, the layering of beliefs about women's power continues; the Malinche of today is both traitor and ancestor, intermediary and deity.

## VIII

The ambiguous nature of power in the Aztec world produced a diverse cast of female characters, from malevolent goddesses to mothers of the nation. The powerful personalities of Malinalxoch and Coyolxauhqui in particular stand out as crucial characters in the Aztec migration stories; embodying the female potential for discord, they exemplify women's disruptive power, and may be one root of the Aztecs' apparent anxiety of feminine influence. Nonetheless, women also appear alongside men as players in the foundation of the Aztec state. Although far from ideal partners at times, the Women of Discord shaped the history of the Aztec people, and their influence, while ambivalent, was always significant. Ordinary women also played vital roles in Aztec society, but they were tainted by the dark shade of their sacred sisters, with whom they were inextricably linked through childbirth, and the disharmony embodied in the Women of Discord was reflected in detectable fears of women's potential for disruption. Women's power was primordial, but also needed to be restrained. As the mother said to her daughter upon coming of age: 'we travel along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If thou goest over here, or if thou goest over there, thou wilt fall in. Only in the middle doth one go, doth one live.'<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Women teetered constantly on a precipice, struggling to control the awesome power of the earth.

Understanding the intricate identity of the Women of Discord, and its origins in the female bond with the earth mother, is vital to closing the circle and understanding the

relationship between mytho-historical figures and the lives of Aztec women. Although discord was frequently associated with femininity in Aztec thought, this does not seem to have resulted in any particular animosity towards women as individuals. Nonetheless, women's connection to the chaotic energy of the earth, overlaid by narrative and reinforced by ritual, not only invested the Women of Discord with mythical power, but also imbued all women with the inherent potential for disruption. Goddesses of the earth, enemies of the chosen people, mothers of the nation, bridges between histories: all women were potentially Women of Discord, but what that meant to individuals is very hard to tell.

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<sup>i</sup> I recognise the difficulties and possible anachronisms of the term 'Aztec', but use it as the most familiar name for a non-specialist audience.

<sup>ii</sup> Caroline Dodds Pennock, 'Gender and Aztec lifecycles', in Deborah L. Nichols and Enrique Rodríguez-Alegría, *The Oxford handbook of the Aztecs* (New York, 2016), pp.388-9.

<sup>iii</sup> On Cihuacoatl's multiple aspects: Kay A. Read, 'More than earth: Cihuacoatl as female warrior, male matron, and inside ruler', in Beverly Moon and Elisabeth Benard, eds., *Goddesses who rule* (Oxford, 2000), pp.51–67.

<sup>iv</sup> Some of the recent issues in this broad debate are exemplified by Karen Nelson, ed., *Attending to early modern women: conflict and concord* (Newark, 2013).

<sup>v</sup> See, for example: Carol Smart, 'Disruptive bodies and unruly sex: the regulation of reproduction and sexuality in the nineteenth century', in Carol Smart, ed., *Regulating womanhood* (London, 1992), pp.7-32; Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly women and female power in the street literature of early modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville, 1992).

<sup>vi</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, 'Female circulation: medical discourse and popular advertising in the mid-Victorian era', in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Body/politics* (London, 1990), p.54.

<sup>vii</sup> Pete Sigal, *The flower and the scorpion: sexuality and ritual in early Nahua culture* (Durham, NC, 2011).

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>ix</sup> Caroline Dodds Pennock, *Bonds of blood: gender, lifecycle and sacrifice in Aztec culture* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp.133-6, 66-71.

<sup>x</sup> Susan Kellogg, 'The woman's room: some aspects of gender relations in Tenochtitlan in the late pre-Hispanic period', *Ethnohistory*, 62 (1995), pp.563-76.

<sup>xi</sup> Public/domestic male/female dichotomies gave Aztec women a more independent role than one might assume from other similar models: Caroline Dodds Pennock, "'A remarkably patterned life": domestic and public in the Aztec household city', *Gender & History*, 23.3 (November 2011), pp.528-46.

<sup>xii</sup> For trenchant discussion of the normalisation of Euro/American ideas of gender in historical scholarship, see Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'Conceptualising gender: Eurocentric foundations of feminist concepts and the challenge of African epistemologies', in *African Gender scholarship: concepts, methodologies and paradigms* (Dakar, 2004), pp.1-8.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine codex: general history of the things of New Spain*, trans. and ed. C. E. Dibble and A. J. O. Anderson, 12 books in 13 vols. (Santa Fe, 1950-82), 10: 29: 191. To enable cross-referencing between different editions, references are given in the form of book: chapter: page number (of the revised edition).

<sup>xiv</sup> Pennock, *Bonds of blood*, p.90.



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<sup>xv</sup> The term ‘mythical history’ reflects the impossibility of extricating myth and ‘fact’ in this complex cyclical tradition: Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec kings: the construction of rulership in Mexica history* (Tucson, 1989) pp.xi-xxvii.

<sup>xvi</sup> Kathryn Burns, *Into the archive: writing and power in colonial Peru* (Durham, NC, 2010), pp.4-7.

<sup>xvii</sup> Constraints of space make detailed deconstruction of every text’s origins impossible, so I have tried to provide guidance in the footnotes for colleagues who wish to follow up on these issues. For Anglophone readers’ convenience, I have referenced English translations of sources where they exist unless there is specific a reason to cite the original.

<sup>xviii</sup> Miguel León-Portilla Bernardino de Sahagún: first anthropologist (Norman, 2002); Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, ed. Ángel María Garibay K (Mexico City, 1999), p.33.

<sup>xix</sup> Florentine codex, 1: 6: 11. Toci and Teteoinnn were usually positive and benevolent figures in this complex, while Tlazolteotl (the ‘Filth Deity’) was almost wholly negative: Catherine R. DiCesare, *Sweeping the way: divine transformation in the Aztec festival of Ochpaniztli* (Boulder, 2009), esp. pp.103-22.

<sup>xx</sup> See, for example, K. Chedgzoy, ‘Impudent women: gender and carnival in early modern culture’, *The Glasgow Review*, 1 (1993): 9-22; and Allyson M. Poska, *Women and authority in early modern Spain: the peasants of Galicia* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>xxi</sup> Wayne Elzey, ‘A hill on a land surrounded by water: an Aztec story of origin and destiny’, *History of Religions*, 31.2 (1991), p.141.

<sup>xxii</sup> Cecelia Klein, ‘Wild woman in colonial Mexico: an encounter of European and Aztec concepts of other’, in Claire Farago, ed., *Reframing the Renaissance: visual culture in Europe and Latin America* (New Haven, 1995), pp.245-63.

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<sup>xxiii</sup> Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de la Nueva-España*, ed. José F. Ramirez (Mexico City, 1867), vol. 1, p.33. For more on Durán and the *Crónica X* see chapters by Boone and Colston in J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin, eds., *Smoke and mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan* (Oxford, 1988); and the introduction and appendices to Diego Durán, *The history of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Doris Heyden (Norman, 1994).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Durán, *History*, pp.36-7. The other source, the *Codex Ramirez*, contains a briefer version of Durán's narrative. Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana precedida del Códice Ramirez*, ed. Manuel Orozco y Berra (Mexico City, 1980), pp.28-30.

<sup>xxv</sup> Achitometl's daughter is named by just one source, which I follow for convenience: Alex Christensen, ed., 'History of the Mexicans as told by their paintings', ed. and trans. Henry Phillips Jr., *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, xxi (1883), p.631, <http://www.famsi.org/research/christensen/pinturas/index.html> (accessed 29 May 2013).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Durán, *History*, pp.36-9.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Codex Chimalpahin, society and politics in Mexico Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Culhuacan, and other Nahuatl altepetl in Central Mexico: the Nahuatl and Spanish annals and accounts collected and recorded by don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin*, ed. and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Susan Schroeder (Norman, 1997), vol. 1, pp.95-9; *Crónica Mexicayotl*, in T.J. Knab and Thelma D. Sullivan (trans.), *A scattering of jades: stories, poems, and prayers of the Aztecs* (New York, 1994), pp.94-7.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún is usually cited (*Primeros Memoriales* [Norman, 1993], f.251v) but none of the sources actually translate Yaocihuatl directly as 'Woman of Discord'.

<sup>xxix</sup> Elzey, 'A hill on a land surrounded by water', pp.138-45.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Gillespie, *Aztec kings*, especially pp.3-120. Figures with the same names/roles as ‘founding queens’ appear at other key moments, emphasizing their symbolic importance; e.g. the mother of Tenochtitlan’s first ruler was also named Atototztli.

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Many alternative versions of this myth exist, including: Florentine Codex, 3: 1: 1-5; Durán, *History*, pp.26-8; Codex Chimalpahin, vol. 1, p.83 (Coyolxauhqui appears here as Huitzilopochtli’s mother); Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, pp.228-9; and *Crónica Mexicayotl*, pp.86-7.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Durán, *History*, 26-8. Durán identified this incident as the root of the practice of human sacrifice by the removal of the heart.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Some scholars identify Coyolxauhqui directly with Malinalxoch but it is clearer to read them as variants of a similar tradition.

<sup>xxxv</sup> The best introductions to this Nahuatl source are Susan Schroeder’s prefaces to the 1997 editions: Codex Chimalpahin, vol. 1, pp.3-13, vol. 2, pp.3-11.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp.77-9.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Durán, *History*, pp.24-5, 31-6.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.24-5.

<sup>xxxix</sup> See, for example, Codex Chimalpahin, vol. 1, pp.77-89; Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, pp.227-9; *Crónica Mexicayotl*, pp.86-93.

<sup>xl</sup> Codex Chimalpahin, vol. 1, p.87.

<sup>xli</sup> Gillespie, *Aztec kings*, p.86.

<sup>xlii</sup> This interpretation is popular, but there is no conclusive evidence for Coyolxauhqui’s lunar identification, although she does share traits with the lunar deity Xochiquetzal. See Susan Milbrath, ‘Decapitated lunar goddesses in Aztec art, myth, and ritual’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 8 (1997), pp.185-206. Emily Umberger convincingly squares this circle by

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suggesting that Coyolxauhqui, although not a lunar goddess, could represent the moon in this allegory by virtue of the fact that ‘as a loser in battle, she would have been compared to the moon by the Mexica’, p.428: ‘Events commemorated by date plaques at the Templo Mayor: further thoughts on the solar metaphor’, in Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed., *The Aztec Templo Mayor: a symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> October 1983* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), p.428.

<sup>xliii</sup> Cecelia Klein disagrees, seeing such concepts as ‘part of a discursive strategy that bolstered, not just the sovereignty of the state itself, but concomitantly the power and authority of men’: ‘Fighting with femininity: gender and war in Aztec Mexico’, *Estudios de Culturá Náhuatl*, 24 (1994) p.245.

<sup>xliv</sup> Susan Schroeder, *Chimalpahin and the kingdoms of Chalco* (Tucson, 1991), pp.183-5; Pennock, *Bonds of blood*, pp.57-9.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Lori Boornazian Diel, ‘Till death do us part: unconventional marriages as Aztec political strategy’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 18 (2007), p.259.

<sup>xlvii</sup> *Codex Xolotl*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Map 6, Amoxcalli [http://amoxcalli.org.mx/laminas.php?id=001-010&act=sig&ord\\_lamina=001-010\\_15](http://amoxcalli.org.mx/laminas.php?id=001-010&act=sig&ord_lamina=001-010_15) (accessed 6 December 2016); Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras historicas*, ed. Edmundo O’Gorman (Mexico City, 1997), vol. 1, pp.326-7.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Diel, ‘Till death’, pp.260-2.

<sup>xlix</sup> Lori Boornazian Diel, ‘Women and political power: the inclusion and exclusion of noblewomen in Aztec pictorial histories’, *Res*, 47 (2005), pp.89-90; Diel, ‘Till death’, pp.262-6.

<sup>li</sup> *Codex en Cruz*, Amoxcalli proyecto, <http://amoxcalli.org.mx/codice.php?id=015-017> (accessed 6 December 2016); Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras historicas*, vol. 2, pp.135-6; Diel, ‘Till death’, pp.266-8.

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<sup>i</sup> Pennock, *Bonds of blood*, pp.124-32.

<sup>li</sup> *Codex Chimalpahin*, i, pp.137-9, ii, pp.43-51; Durán, *History*, pp.249-62, *History and mythology of the Aztecs: the codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. and ed. John Bierhorst (Tucson, 1992), p.113; Tezozomoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, pp.387-97.

<sup>lii</sup> I am grateful to Emily Umberger for suggesting that there are ‘two types’ of Women of Discord (personal communication, 2014).

<sup>liii</sup> *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* (Loubat, 1901),

[http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Telleriano-Remensis/page\\_25r.jpg](http://www.famsi.org/research/loubat/Telleriano-Remensis/page_25r.jpg) (accessed 6 December 2016); Cecelia Klein, ‘Rethinking Cihuacoatl: Aztec political imagery of the conquered woman’, in J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin, eds., *Smoke and mist: Mesoamerican studies in memory of Thelma D. Sullivan* (Oxford, 1988), Part I, pp.239-41. It is possible the Huitzilopochtli/Malinalxoch narrative legitimated Tenochtitlan’s conquest of Malinalco by characterizing their royal line (supposedly Malinalxoch’s descendants) as a ‘potential threat and challenger to the basin Aztecs’: Emily Umberger, ‘Further Thoughts on the Toltec Hypothesis’ (unpublished draft, 2014).

<sup>liv</sup> Emily Umberger, ‘The metaphorical underpinnings of Aztec history: the case of the 1473 civil war’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 18.1 (2007), pp.11-29,

<sup>lv</sup> The Coyolxauhqui Stone is just one of several striking examples of female dismemberment and decapitation in Aztec art and archaeology. See Elizabeth H. Boone, ‘The “Coatlicues” at the Templo Mayor’, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 10.2 (1999), pp.189-206.

<sup>lvi</sup> *Florentine codex*, 2: 30: 118-24; Betty Ann Brown, ‘Ochpaniztli in historical perspective’, in Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed., *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), pp.195-210; DiCesare, *Sweeping the way*.

<sup>lvii</sup>; Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, Part 2C, p.62.

<sup>lviii</sup> Caroline Dodds, 'Female dismemberment and decapitation: gendered understandings of power in Aztec ritual violence', in Stuart Carroll, ed., *Cultures of violence: interpersonal violence in historical perspective* (Basingstoke, 2007), pp.47-63.

<sup>lix</sup> Florentine codex, 2: 27: 96-107.

<sup>lx</sup> Emily Umberger, 'Art and imperial strategy in Tenochtitlan', in Frances F. Berdan et al, eds., *Aztec imperial strategies* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), p.95.

<sup>lxi</sup> David Carrasco, *City of sacrifice: the Aztec empire and the role of violence in civilization* (Boston, 1999), p.83. Both men and women acted as *ixiptla*, a term usually translated as 'impersonator' but which actually relates to 'skin' or 'covering', presumably in reference to the deity attire. Molly Bassett, *The fate of earthly things: Aztec gods and god-bodies* (Austin, 2015), *passim*.

<sup>lxii</sup> Read, 'More Than earth'.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Florentine codex, 6: 29: 162.

<sup>lxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 10: 1: 1.

<sup>lxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 10: 1: 1-2.

<sup>lxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 10: 1: 5.

<sup>lxvii</sup> *Codex Chimalpahin*, vol. 1, pp.77-9; Durán, *History*, pp.26-8.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Florentine codex, 10: 5: 19-22. Only once is a nobleman criticized as 'a sower of discord' and this is in the context of spreading trouble by boasting of his exploits.

<sup>lxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 10: 13: 45-50.

<sup>lxx</sup> For more on using *huehuetlahtolli* to access personal interactions, see Caroline Dodds Pennock, 'Insights from the ancient word: The use of colonial sources in the study of Aztec society', in Ricardo Roque and Kim Wagner, eds., *Engaging colonial knowledge: imperial archives in world history* (Basingstoke, 2012), pp.115-34. On their origins see also Miguel

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León-Portilla and Librado Silva Galeana, *Huehuetlahtolli: testimonios de la antigua palabra* (Mexico City, 1991), pp.7–45.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Huehuetlahtolli were ritual discourses delivered on significant personal and public occasions. George Baudot argues that Sahagún’s transcriptions are highly accurate: *Utopia and history in Mexico* (Niwot, 1995), p.232.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Florentine codex, 6: 19: 100.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 6: 22: 122.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Ross Hassig, *Aztec warfare: imperial expansion and political control* (Norman, 1988), pp.36-7.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Florentine codex, 6: 18: 93.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec thought and culture* (Norman, 1990), pp.124-30.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> The Aztec calendar was based on a series of overlapping cycles which possessed different functions. The 260-day *tonalpohualli* (‘counting of days’) was used for divination. The ‘day signs’ under which an individual was born and named were believed to shape their fate and personality.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Florentine codex, 4: 33: 107.

<sup>lxxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 4: 33: 108.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, pp.149-52.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> Florentine codex, 4: 33: 107-8.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 23: 64.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Malintzin’s complex life and legacy, as well as the intricacies of sixteenth-century sources for women’s lives, are beautifully unpicked by Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin’s* choices: an Indian woman in the conquest of Mexico (Albuquerque, 2006).

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<sup>lxxxiv</sup> James Lockhart, trans. and ed., *We people here: Nahuatl accounts of the conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley, 1993), p.86; Sandra Messinger Cypess, *La Malinche in Mexican literature: from history to myth* (Austin, 1991).

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Max Harris, 'Moctezuma's Daughter: The Role of La Malinche in Mesoamerican Dance', *Journal of American Folklore*, 109.432 (1996), pp. 149-77.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Townsend suggests 'Malintzin could easily have been understood to be a ceremonial god impersonator for the Spaniards' obviously powerful deity'.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Florentine codex, 6: 19: 101.